

EDUCATION 2.0

CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

EDITED BY
LINDA HERRERA





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2025 Linda Herrera



Copyright of individual chapters are maintained by the chapter author(s).

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Linda Herrera (ed.), *Education 2.0: Chronicles of Technological and Cultural Change in Egypt*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0489>

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Unless otherwise stated, figures are reproduced under the fair dealing principle. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0489#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-701-8

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-702-5

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-703-2

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-705-6

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80511-704-9

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0489

Cover image: Ministry of Education and Technical Education, Egypt, CC0

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

12. The World Bank's Involvement in Education Reform: Interview with Amira Kazem

*Linda Herrera*¹

Abstract

The World Bank and Egypt's Ministry of Education and Technical Education negotiated a \$500 million loan, 'Supporting Egypt Education Reform Project' (2018-2025) which includes five components around early childhood education, teachers and education leaders, assessment reform, education technology infrastructure and services, project management and communication, and monitoring and evaluation. Amira Kazem, Senior Operations Officer for the Middle East and North Africa at the World Bank, explains the role of the Bank in education sector reform and the process of negotiations and decision-making about a loan. She illustrates different ways she keeps the project on track by organizing institutional capacity building and working with other international providers.

Keywords

assessments, communication, early childhood, loan negotiations, Ministry of Education, sectoral change, Thanaweya Amma, World Bank

1 This interview took place on 2 March 2020 at the World Bank office in Cairo. Many thanks to members of the Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project team, Abdel Hamid Mahmoud, Heba Shama, and Hany Zayed, who supported this interview with background research, questions, and transcribing.

I. Managing Loan Negotiations

LH As the Team Leader for the World Bank loan ‘Supporting Egypt Education Reform Project,’ what are your main responsibilities?

AK² Typically, in every Bank operation you have one or more team leaders in addition to a Senior Operations Officer and technical and fiduciary specialists. In this project, we have two task team leaders with equivalent ranks: me, the Senior Operations Officer, and Juan Manuel Moreno, Lead Education Specialist.³ Each of us brings different complementary strengths and technical and operational expertise depending on the phase/area of the project. During the project preparation phase for instance, we had a continuous dialogue, especially as we finalized the design document and the World Bank board package. Juan leads the student assessment component, while another colleague leads the component on teachers and educational leaders (and so on for the other components). I lead the project management component that includes monitoring and evaluation (M&E), communications, and other areas. Being the co-Team Leader and the Senior Operations Officer, even when I am not leading a component, I do not leave things to fall through the cracks. I might not take credit for this, and I might not be popular, but part of my role as a team leader is to get things moving and facilitate the achieving of results. Communication among us as a team remains key in this process.

In the end, the project design is developed collectively after extensive discussions and consultations with the Ministry of Education. One important thing to note is that we draft and finalize design documents after reaching common understanding with the Ministry. Other colleagues in management are responsible for quality control and subsequent internal approvals. For example, the night of 23 March 2018 which was a Friday, was particularly important because this was when the Vice President (VP) needed to press the button and sign off on the World Bank’s Board package, otherwise the timeline would have been delayed. I didn’t know why they had not yet been signed, so I called his office to inquire. They

2 Dr. Amira Kazem was the World Bank’s Senior Operations Officer, Education Sector in the Cairo Office from 2012-2025. See Dr. Kazem’s LinkedIn profile for more details, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-amira-kazem-5143468/>

3 See Moreno 2018.

told me that the VP's office wanted to change something in the documents. After a twenty-minute conversation, I was able to do the required changes and resubmit the document. Even though this was a weekend, we were able to push the button at 2:00 a.m. (Cairo time). This is an example of the kinds of things I do; taking responsibility, being proactive, collaborating with my team and colleagues in other teams to get things done, ensuring that the project is on track.

I will give an example from the kindergarten diagnostic study to explain how I manage communications.⁴ As a Team Leader, it is my role to facilitate communications and step in to unblock obstacles to the extent possible. I saw resistance from a member partner about conducting the diagnostic study. I did not understand where this resistance was coming from or why it was happening, so I intervened. I spoke directly with the person to better understand the situation, and told her that if I had known before, I would have cleared the issue sooner. I realized that we had to more clearly communicate that our team was not imposing but helping. We are committed to transparency. In situations like the diagnostic study, we had to reiterate to stakeholders that we were not imposing our views but providing technical support to align with good practice gained from similar activities.

LH This speaks to the unwritten parts of the job. Does this job require someone who understands how to navigate the work culture and bureaucracy in Egypt which has its own logic and specificities ?

AK Not true. It is a matter of mandate. This is how we are profiled, our mandate and our passion. It does not have to do with one's nationality. I worked on Jordan, Yemen, and Iraq, and in all of them, I worked with their interest at heart and with the same level of commitment that I have when working on Egypt. I am not extra loyal to Egypt because I am Egyptian. My loyalty to education surpasses my loyalty to my country or any other country.

LH The question is more about the cultural competence needed to work in Egypt's complex system, rather than loyalty or preference for one country over

4 The KG-component of the 'Supporting Egypt Education Reform Project' was under the leadership of Samira Nikaein Towfighian, World Bank Education Specialist.

another. This country has its own educational history, practices, bureaucratic culture. Is this something that you can speak to?

AK I always struggle with the idea of unique. I do not think that Egypt is unique or that the reform is unique. Yes, the size is different. It is big, with twenty-two million students. Jordan, for example, is much smaller but not much easier, because the resistance is similar. For each project, every time, we still must establish communication and good intentions, trust me. People still ask me, ‘What is in it for you as a Bank and as a World Bank employee?’ Oftentimes, I need to clarify that my salary does not depend on taking certain stands but on getting the job done and done well. I often need to establish that the Bank is here to support.

Currently, Juan deals more with Deena Boraie (Senior Advisor for Assessment, Examination, and Curriculum), given that he leads the related component on student assessment. We at the World Bank operate closely with Habiba Ezz (Director of the Project Coordination Unit, PCU), to carry out our implementation support to the project. For the KG diagnostics, it is quite helpful to have direct communication with the team designated to lead from the MOETE’s side: Nelly Elzayat (Advisor for Early Childhood and Education Policy), Dr. Randa Shaheen (Ministry Consultant, Early Childhood), and you, Linda Herrera (Director of the Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project). Direct discussions facilitate making progress and make the situation easier when there are no additional steps to move things forward.

LH *You have mentioned the Bank’s role in **supporting** the reform project. People can have the impression that the Bank **imposes** more than it **supports**. How do you respond to this?*

AK I might be going off on a tangent, and I have said this before, but I want to mention here that I am a proud student of Galal Amin.⁵ I am still not over his loss in 2018. I had taken an economic development course with him. Two days after I graduated from Computer Science, I enrolled in a master’s in economics thanks to him. When I received the offer to

5 Galal Amin (1935-2018) was a prominent and award-winning economist and commentator who taught at the American University in Cairo for forty-four years. He was especially known for his critical positions on Egypt’s economic and cultural dependency on the West.

join the Bank he said, 'You are going to get us in trouble! We will have to sell the Suez Canal!' I smiled and left. I had the opportunity to prove him wrong. We offer our clients good support.

LH Could you understand Dr. Galal Amin's reservations about the Bank?

AK The World Bank is an institution with good and bad sides, and the arrangements we enter into with governments depend on negotiations. During negotiations, people are often in a hurry to conclude preparations and rush into implementation. Sometimes they get surprised when the implementation starts, even though it is based on the requirements stated clearly in the loan document. I tell them, 'You chose to sign off. You chose not to actively negotiate'.

LH Have there been renegotiations in the current education loan?

AK No, because we already had many discussions with the Ministry during the preparation stage of the project. The only thing that came out during negotiations was that they wanted to double the amount of the loan. But we told them that we could not just double the loan. It requires a lot of work and revisiting components. This is something that we can get back to later. This is all documented. Another thing that happened has to do with advanced payments, and we processed an exception.

2. Planning for Sectoral Change in Education

LH As someone who has been involved in loan discussions about education reform over many years, can you explain the process?

AK It is crucial to be selective. As Deena Boraie said, 'If we address everything, we achieve nothing'. And I agree with that to an extent because we do not have the capacity or funds to address everything. Regarding the current project, we have been in dialogue to support the Ministry of Education since the time of the Minister of Education Moheb el-Rafei (March-September 2015). In parallel, we had conversations with Dr. Tarek Shawki who at that time was the Secretary General of the Specialized Council for Education and Scientific Research. Before Dr. Tarek, the Ministry's priorities were geared towards school construction

and how to address overcrowding. We said access to school is not the only issue, there is also the issue of quality.

In November 2015, we got a request from the Ministry of International Cooperation (MOIC) to deliver a high-level workshop and develop a sector reform roadmap. During the workshop in April 2016, Dr. Tarek announced his reform vision in the presence of the current Minister. We did not impose anything. He spoke about how the reform would start with kindergarten even though it is not compulsory in Egypt, and the importance of signaling a completely new start (Education 2.0) starting from KG and Grade 1. Other areas he identified for sector reform were a new curriculum and new teacher training. We worked out implementation responsibilities.

LH It seems as if this reform was a long time coming.

AK We knew it was coming, but we did not know if Dr. Tarek would become a minister. He was summoned by the President who essentially announced it in public at the Youth Forum in December 2016.

LH How do you determine if the Ministry and implementing institutions have the know-how and capacity to successfully carry out and maintain the reform project?

AK We provide a critical mass of support such as organized institutional capacity building in the Ministry, in parallel with relying on international providers in the initial phase. The model that happened with the Curriculum Center (Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development, CCIMD) is very interesting. An investment was made to build capacity there, and the MOETE's agency delivered. Similarly, with the National Center for Examination and Educational Evaluation (NCEEE), The Ministry brought in international companies to support local staff with building and developing item-tests, administrating the test, and working with local graders.⁶ The Ministry is likely to consider a similar approach for professional development and this is probably why they are engaged with USAID's Teach for Tomorrow initiative.

6 For more information on these initiatives, see Shawki and Mohamed 2021a and 2021b and Chapter 6 in this volume.

The Minister always acknowledges that there will be mistakes, but it is critical to start the change process.

LH In the new education system, children do not have formal exams until Grade 4. Do you think it is risky to forego the usual formal exams in years 1-3?

AK It is about assessing, not examining. From the Ministry side, Deena Boraie and Nawal Shalaby will tell you that the formative assessments are not always done as planned and there need to be more of them. But the loan project does not support primary assessments, only the Grade 4 assessment for literacy and numeracy.

LH There is also the Grade 9 exam that determines if a student will be sorted into the technical or academic track for high school. It has been criticized for not being standardized or fair. Are there reform solutions for this?

AK Currently, the Grade 9 examination is a high-stakes examination that is administered by the governorates (without coordination between them). This is not a fair exam. The scores are not comparable across years or governorates, and it is not in the interest of the most disadvantaged groups. This Grade 9 examination is a key factor that accounts for the gaps in completion and transition rates between students of lower and higher income levels. For Grade 9, we advised Dr. Tarek to postpone tackling this exam since too many things are already going on (see Chapter 6 in this volume).

3. Changing the Thanaweya Amma

LH The Thanaweya Amma has arguably been the most difficult and controversial part of the education reform project. Even though there seems to be near universal criticism of this exam, it has been exceedingly difficult to change. How does the World Bank factor into the reform of the Thanaweya Amma?

AK Anyone who understands the education system in Egypt understands that you need to start with secondary education and the Thanaweya Amma. As early as 2006, Juan Manuel Moreno was here in Egypt. In about 2008 we had a workshop under the auspices of the then Minister of Investment Mahmoud Mohieddin. It concluded in a meeting with the Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif. There was a public event, and

we made a presentation about changing the Thanaweya Amma, the secondary exit test. This was a recommendation by the World Bank. I will quote Juan Manuel Moreno, who says that the Thanaweya Amma reform is 'the mother of all reforms'. Because if you do not change the incentives at the end of the tunnel, then the reforms will not result in progress in the early grades. This is not our view or his view; there is a convergence of views on this point (see Chapter 11 in this volume).

LH It is interesting that even though discussions to change the Thanaweya Amma exam started years ago, the same problems persist.

AK This was a one-off thing which did not happen again. And Mahmoud Mohieddin was not the Minister of Education, but the Minister of Investment. He led this effort because he realized that education had to change. It came from him and not from the Ministry of Education which is possibly why it did not succeed. Therefore, you need political support and political will, without which the reform cannot move. This is why it is important that the President explicitly supports the education reforms in public events like the Youth Forum.⁷ Without this level of political support, this reform will not sustain and survive. You also need buy-in from the Ministry at different levels of administration like the teachers. You need to get teachers on board by giving them incentives which are not necessarily monetary, but could be recognition, respect. It is about ownership, 'What is in it for me?'

LH What is currently happening with the Thanaweya Amma exam ?

AK There was a ministerial decree by Dr. Tarek to change secondary education to implement a cumulative GPA system, but that was insufficient. Parliament needs to be involved in changing the Education Law. Currently, there are no changes beyond changes in the testing approach with new test items that are structured away from rote learning.

7 The World Youth Forum (WYF) is an annual event that takes place in Egypt's coastal Sinai town Sharm El-Sheikh. It began in November 2017 under the auspices of President Abdel Fathat El Sisi. According to its website, the WYF provides a place 'for youth to engage with top policymakers.... The World Youth Forum is attended by a wide range of participants, including and not limited to heads of states and government, international young leaders, inspiring youth in various fields, prominent international figures and youth groups from around the world.' See the WYF website <https://wyfegypt.com/about-us/>.

The MOETE needs to take a decision regarding the secondary exit system urgently because students entering Grade 10 in September 2020 need to know what is expected of them and whether their assessment will be cumulative or not. If a new system does not go into effect September 2020, the Ministry would need to wait to apply it to the new cohort of Grade 10 students in September 2021 or subsequent years.⁸

LH Is the WB involved in some way in lobbying the parliament to change the Education Law?

AK We do not get involved in changing laws or lobbying, but we reward the MOETE with disbursement linked indicators once the agreed results are achieved and verified by a third independent party.

4. Public Resistance and the Challenge of Communication

LH Communication is included as a component of the reform project. How important is a communication strategy for achieving the goals of the reform?

AK The World Bank loan supports communication. It is a whole sub-component with delayed action. We provided support on a draft strategy for communication (in June 2019), but for reasons I am not aware of, we were asked to close two consultancies supporting strategic communications. We are not bureaucratic, but we say to the Ministry that we are here to support. We include a grievance system in the draft strategy, and we need to work on further developing it and making it public. The Ministry needs to do something to show people that it is listening. When Dr. Tarek became minister, we had this big meeting with subject counselors. At the end of the meeting, they asked if we as the World Bank could pass some message to Dr. Tarek because they did not have a direct communication channel with him. We only conveyed that they wanted to speak to him.

I trust that people still love Dr. Tarek, which comes up in focus groups discussions. They trust him and have an emotional attachment

⁸ Ultimately, parliament did not change the Education Law, and the Minister was not able to implement the Grade Point Average (GPA) system.

to him. They want Dr. Tarek or other high level official that they trust to talk to them about education and the changes. They do not want singers or celebrities to advocate for the reform. We are not saying create something new but bring things together. This is all under Component 5.2 which we are very passionate about. It was very rewarding when the communication strategy was developed and very disappointing when it was put on hold. This is how serious we are about communication.

LH Many aspects of this reform have been met with resistance, as seen on social media, in the press, and other places. Were you expecting this?

AK We all expected resistance, but we supported communications early on. We had manuals from as early as July 2018, on how to handle procedures. We communicated on the TORs (Terms of Reference) of the PCU early on hoping they would come in, which they did a little later. We had communications about how people should deal with this. The loan was effective August 2018, so we wanted to give them cushioning. I was hoping we would have more and different communications. Resistance is not surprising, but the lack of a more comprehensive, targeted communication is a little surprising.

LH What else has surprised you about the reform process?

AK Let us talk about the positives. I am impressed with the graders/markers. This was the first pleasant surprise. When I checked the first dry run of the Arabic and English exams, I was also very impressed with the quality of item-test/questions and the effort that went into administering the testing process (for Grade 10 in 2018/2019). The evident positives are the quality of questions, graders, and posting and reporting of results. For KG, teachers need more training. We need to train them differently. This KG diagnostic study is important to get things moving forward. I am very hopeful that after the KG diagnostic study, more relevant training will be provided to teachers.⁹

⁹ See an analysis from the KG diagnostic study by Krafft et al. 2023.

5. Bibliography

- Krafft, Caroline, Towfighian, Samira, Raikes, Abbie, and Sayre Mojjani, Rebecca. 2023. 'What Can We Learn from Pre-Primary Quality Assurance Systems? Evidence from the Arab Republic of Egypt', Policy Research Working Paper 10482, World Bank Group, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099236006152341431/pdf/IDU0904787e905e70047130bd470ff9d01e83958.pdf>
- Moreno, Juan Manuel. 2018. *Egypt - Supporting Egypt Education Reform Project* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/967021519215311151/Egypt-Supporting-Egypt-Education-Reform-Project>
- Shawki, Tarek, and Mohamed, Ramadan. 2021a. 'Journey of Thanaweya Amma Exam Forms', *Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=289fL9SNUkU>
- Shawki, Tarek, and Mohamed, Ramadan. 2021b. 'The Question Banks in Egypt Explained', *Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIKhCpwVy3E>

